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SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS – THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR DISABLED PEOPLE IN DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

The main purpose of the article is to show social support of people with disabilities from a structural perspective. This perspective shows the relationship between the structure of social networks of people with disabilities and the actions they take in difficult situations. The very level of embedding of individuals in social networks is an important factor enabling them to benefit from social support and resources that are available in social networks. Without social relationships with people who form social environments of an individual, people with disabilities cannot rely on help in overcoming difficulties. Support is not possible without the presence of others who are willing to provide it.

The analysis will be based on data collected in Social Diagnosis in 2015, which will allow reconstructing the size of social networks of people with disabilities in terms of their number of interactions with family, friends and acquaintances.

Keywords: social support, social network, disability, relationships, social exchange

SUPPORT IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

The concept of social support in the field of social sciences has appeared relatively recently, in the 1960s–1970s, although its subject matter has a long tradition in sociology. The term refers to aid relationships, so that it has clear connotations with terms such as social networks, social exchange, relationships, and social relations that have long been present in sociological reflection (Grotowska-Leder 2008: 9–10; House, Landis and Umberson 1988: 541). In the broadest sense, social support means giving someone help in difficult situations (Sarason, Sarason and Shearing 1986; Sęk and Cieślak 2011; Kirenko 2002: 75). Sally Shumaker and Arlene Brownell define this concept as the exchange of resources between two individuals to improve the well-being of the individual who is their recipient (Shumaker and Brownell 1984: 11). James S. House (1981: 235–243) also defines social support as a kind of interpersonal exchange. However, he draws attention to its content by showing its various aspects:

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emotional, consisting in showing love, respect, kindness and understanding; instrumental, manifesting itself in the form of concrete aid actions; informational, in providing information relevant to the person in difficulty; and evaluative, understood as providing one's opinion about the person of concern. Peggy A. Thoits (1983) describes social support as the degree to which an individual's basic social needs are met in their interactions with others. According to her, these needs can be fulfilled by two forms of support: social and emotional support based on feelings of affection, sympathy, understanding, and acceptance given by others, and instrumental support, including providing advice and information, as well as physical and financial support (Thoits 1983: 145–159). Peter Franks, Thomas Campbell, and Cleveland Shields (1992) define social support as a system of social relationships and bonds positively affecting an individual directly or indirectly. Social support is similarly understood by Ian McDowell and Claire Newell (1987) as people within a social network assisting a person lacking emotional, informational and material resources. These last two definitions emphasise the relationship between support and the social networks of individuals. The centre of gravity in such expression of social support is transferred from its functional aspects to the analysis of the structure and characteristics of social networks of individuals (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska and Grotowska-Leder 2008: 89). This breaks away from issues concerning the types of aid received by individuals in the context of social exchanges, crucial for the functional perspective of defining social support (Cohen 1988: 271), placing the emphasis on the analysis of the structure of social networks in which social support is realised through social ties with other individuals, groups and wider communities (Lin, Simeone, Ensel and Kuo 1979: 108–119). In this sense, social support refers to the social environment in which individuals function, and it is the consequence of their belonging to social networks and the degree of their embeddedness in them (Bowling, Farquhar and Grundy 1991: 549; Pommerbach 1988).

Social networks are a set of existing relationships and social ties in which an individual functions, including both their informal and intergroup relationships and formalised relationships (Barnes 1954: 39–58; Wasserman and Faust 1994). What connects individuals (actors) in social networks is the flow of symbols (information, ideas, values, norms, messages, etc.), (physical and material) objects, and positive and negative feelings (Turner and Maryanski 2003). Consequently, a social network is a structure through which support is provided (McDowell and Newell 1987: 155).

Therefore, the very existence of social networks plays a vital role in the ability of individuals to receive support. The presence of social networks means embedding an individual in a potentially supportive environment, and it is a necessary base for providing and receiving support (Kacperczyk 2006: 19). This allows treating social networks in which individuals participate as an essential indicator of social support resulting from the assumption that it cannot exist without the presence of others (O'Reilly 1988: 863–873).

In relation to people with disabilities, as shown by current research conducted in Poland, the presence in the immediate environment of people ready to provide support, having the right skills and enough time to help and care are the basic conditions to alleviate ailments in the everyday lives of people with disabilities (Ostrowska and Sikorska 1996; Ostrowska and Sikorska 2001). Hence, the reconstruction of the characteristics of social networks in which people with disabilities function will reveal the role of relationships with family, friends and

acquaintances in difficult situations in which they need support. It will also show the impact the presence of informal networks has on the ways people with disabilities cope with difficulties in everyday life, and on their will to live.

STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

The primary objective of the study was to reconstruct the structures of the networks of people with disabilities in terms of their size, as determined by the number of interactions with people from different circles forming their social backgrounds based on strong ties (family and friends) and weak ties (acquaintances) and their homogeneity by showing the average number of interactions with acquaintances of different social status. This was used to show how belonging to social networks influences the will to live of people with disabilities, and how it affects their actions in difficult situations.

The purpose of the analysis was to verify two hypotheses:

1. For people living with disabilities, not being embedded in social networks results in lower levels of will to live.
2. A lack of relations with family, friends and acquaintances is not conducive to people with disabilities adopting active attitudes toward difficult situations.

The study was based on data collected in a Social Diagnosis study in 2015.¹ 29,569 people were subjected to the study, of which 10.3% were disabled.²

The percentage by degree of disability is shown in Table 1. Because the sample was different in terms of degree of disability, it was possible to recreate social networks of people with differing degrees of disability to see how much their disability itself affects the networks' size and diversity in terms of the number of interactions with family, friends and acquaintances, and the homogeneity scale of these interactions within a group of friends.

Table 1. Percentage of people with disabilities with differing degrees of disability in the research sample

Legal confirmation of disability	<i>N</i>	[%]
severe disability	924	31.8
moderate disability	1 328	45.7
mild disability	652	22.5
total	3 266	10.6

Source: (Czapiński and Panek 2015: 249–250)

¹ The use of the Social Diagnosis database allowed for independent analyses of the social networks of people with disabilities gathered based on a nationwide representative sample. This was made possible by shared databases in SPSS, which allow the collected data to be used for independent analyses.

² The analysis covered only those with a legal disability who, at the time of the study, had a legal confirmation of disability indicating its degree.

The size of a network of people with disabilities, reconstructed on the basis of the declared average number of interactions with family, friends and acquaintances (see Table 2) shows that most of their social interactions are carried out within the immediate family. Regardless of the degree of disability, the average number of interactions with closest relatives was over 7. Interactions with friends are rarer and include just over 4 people on average. The respondents have had slightly more interactions with a wide circle of friends, including co-workers, neighbours, friends from work, school, etc. The average number of people with whom the respondents declared interactions is markedly above 4 people on average (see Table 2).

Table 2. Average number of interactions between persons with disabilities and immediate family, friends and acquaintances, considering the degree of disability

Legal confirmation of disability		Number of people one interacts with		
		from the immediate family	from among friends	from among acquaintances
Severe degree	Average	7.07	3.97	4.37
	N	760	757	753
	Standard deviation	5.863	4.804	6.515
Moderate degree	Average	7.13	4.07	4.97
	N	1132	1130	1123
	Standard deviation	6.137	4.467	6.470
Mild degree	Average	7.17	4.09	4.83
	N	621	619	619
	Standard deviation	5.447	4.160	5.790
Total	Average	7.12	4.05	4.75
	N	2513	2506	2495
	Standard deviation	5.888	4.498	6.325

Source: own study based on data from (*Diagnoza społeczna...*)

The number of interactions both with family and friends decreases along with an increase in the degree of disability, although these differences are not substantial enough to say that the degree of disability significantly influences the number of interactions with friends and relatives. Neither do relationships with acquaintances depend on the degree of disability. Here, people with moderate disability have had the highest average number of interactions (see Table 2). The mere fact of being disabled has a larger impact on the size of the network of people with disabilities than the degree of disability. Social networks of people with functional disabilities are much smaller than those of the able-bodied population, according to data collected in 2015 as part of the Social Diagnosis. The average number of interactions between able-bodied people and family was 8.16, between friends it was 5.22, and acquaintances, 7.05. Thus, on average it was higher by 1.04 for family interactions, 1.17 for interactions with friends, and 2.3 for interactions with acquaintances, as compared to the number

of relationships with family, friends and acquaintances declared by people with disabilities. In addition, almost twice as often as in the case of able-bodied people, disabled respondents declared a lack of interactions with their immediate family and friends, and by 6.9 percentage points more often than able-bodied people, they indicated no interactions with acquaintances (see Stojkow and Żuchowska-Skiba 2017). This indicates that the networks of people with disabilities are smaller than those of able-bodied people, especially with regard to relationships based on weak ties with acquaintances, which are much smaller than in the case of able-bodied people. In addition, social relations of people with disabilities, regardless of the degree of disability, are quite homogeneous (see Table 3).

Table 3. Homogeneity of interactions of people with disabilities.

Legal confirmation of disability		have different culinary tastes	Acquaintances (are):			
			like different types of music, literature, entertainment	much poorer or richer	have different political views	much older or younger
Severe degree	average	1.38	1.39	1.42	1.38	1.34
	N	750	751	751	751	754
	standard deviation	0.487	0.488	0.493	0.486	0.474
Moderate degree	average	1.39	1.38	1.41	1.38	1.33
	N	1127	1127	1128	1127	1130
	standard deviation	0.487	0.486	0.491	0.486	0.470
Mild degree	average	1.40	1.41	1.44	1.43	1.38
	N	619	620	619	620	620
	standard deviation	0.491	0.493	0.497	0.495	0.486
Total	average	1.39	1.39	1.42	1.39	1.35
	N	2496	2498	2498	2498	2504
	standard deviation	0.488	0.488	0.493	0.488	0.475

Source: own study based on data from (*Diagnoza społeczna...*)

The average number of interactions with friends who show dissimilar political views and lifestyles, have a different economic status, and are much older or younger ranges from 1.35 to 1.42. This shows that within the circles of friends of people with disabilities, the predominant people are of a similar status, resulting in little access to information from diverse social circles. This reduces their chances of accessing the latest trends and innovations and information on emerging opportunities, e.g. on the labour market (see Wysieńska 2010: 2).

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE WILL TO LIVE AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The average rating of will to live in the last few days among the disabled surveyed in the Social Diagnosis survey in 2015 was 8.08³. The degree of disability had little impact on the above: on average people with severe disabilities rate their will to live at 7.98, those with moderate disabilities at 8.13, and with mild disabilities at 8.12. These differences are too small to conclude that the degree of disability significantly influences the felt desire to live. On the other hand, it can be seen that with the size of the network, the desire of persons with disabilities to live increases regardless of the degree of disability. Correlation coefficient Pearson's r shows a weak correlation $r = 0.135$ between the number of interactions with the family and a declared average will to live; a weak correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.111$) between the number of interactions with acquaintances; and a weak correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.151$) between the number of friends and the average rating of one's desire to live in recent days. Although these relationships are weak, it is noteworthy that the mere presence of social networks and their size translate into a greater sense of will to live (see Table 4). The lowest average rating of will to live in recent days was declared by persons who did not have interactions with their families, which was 6.77. Even interactions with a few relatives, that is in the range of 1 to 5 people, increases the rating of will to live among the respondents to 7.82. The highest rating of will to live was declared by persons whose number of interactions ranged from 11 to 15 relatives. With a higher number of interactions, the average is lower but still strongly above the average rating of will to live declared by people with disabilities (see Table 4).

Lack of interactions with acquaintances lowers the average rating of will to live (the average will to live rating is 7.76). Here, too, as in the case of family, people who have had interactions with 11–15 acquaintances rate their will to live the highest. The lack of relationships with friends reduces the average declared rating of will to live to 7.62. It increases to 8.03 for interactions with 1 to 5 acquaintances, and for relationships with 16 to 20 friends it is 9.03. People with a large network of friends of up to 20 people also have the highest average rating of their will to live, which came closest to stating that they really wanted to live.

The data show that a lack of family relationships has the greatest impact on the average rating of will to live among people with disabilities. This indicates that family is a significant support network for this social category. Respondents who have not maintained relations with relatives rated their will to live the lowest from among all the respondents. However, the average rating of will to live among people with disabilities is also significantly influenced by the network of friends and acquaintances, whose absence does not cause a decrease in the average rating of will to live as strongly as the lack of interactions with family, but their presence increases the rating more than in the absence of such interactions (see Table 4).

³ As a part of the Social Diagnosis study in 2015, the respondents rated their will to live in the last few days on a scale of 1–10, where 1 meant total lack of will to live and 10 – very high will to live.

Table 4. Average rating of one's will to live and interactions with family, acquaintances and friends $D = 2507$

	Average	N	Standard deviation
interactions with family			
None	6.77	61	2.077
1–5	7.82	1187	2.032
6–10	8.34	883	1.863
11–15	8.56	195	1.744
16–20	8.45	128	2.038
Above 21	8.30	53	2.025
interactions with acquaintances			
None	7.76	407	2.243
1–5	8.07	1455	1.923
6–10	8.31	434	1.897
11–15	8.47	92	1.607
16–20	7.96	51	2.135
Above 21	8.43	49	1.860
interactions with friends			
None	7.62	315	2.211
1–5	8.03	1644	1.968
6–10	8.48	427	1.813
11–15	8.56	66	1.570
16–20	9.03	30	1.474
Above 21	7.76	17	2.306
Total	8.08	2499	1.980

Source: own study based on data from: (*Diagnoza społeczna...*)

STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TYPES OF ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

According to data collected during the Social Diagnosis study in 2015, in difficult situations people with disabilities are most likely to adopt **active attitudes to tackle a problem by taking actions to solving it or asking for help from other people**. 42.8% of the disabled respondents pull themselves together to act and solve the problem themselves, while 40.7% ask others for help in such situations. The type of actions undertaken to cope with difficulties depended on the degree of disability: the higher the degree of disability, the less often the respondents declared self-dealing in difficult situations and would more often ask for help. Persons with severe disability ask for help more often (by 4.6%) than those with moderate disabilities, and by 8.1 percentage points more often than people with mild disabilities. At the

same time, they are less likely to be involved in self-management and solving difficult situations 8.7 percentage points more than people with moderate disabilities and 13 percentage points less than those with legally certified mild disabilities (see Table 5). When dealing with difficult situations, people with disabilities adopt attitudes that **demonstrate their reconciliation with their fate and acceptance of the situation they are in**. 33% of the respondents console themselves with the idea that it might have been worse or that others were worse off. People with mild disabilities (39.6%), less often with moderate disabilities (32.7%), and least often with severe disabilities (27.8%) are the most likely to respond in such a way in difficult situations. 31.5% of the respondents seek help from God through prayer, which also indicates acceptance of the situation and the belief that any human action in such a situation would be ineffective and only the intervention of the supernatural could help. Such activities are most often chosen by people with severe disabilities. 20.3% of the respondents have other activities that allow them to take their minds off the situation they are in. Respondents with severe disability, least often among all respondents, cope with difficult situations by occupying themselves with other things to distract them (16.5%). This approach was most often adopted by people with moderate (22.6%) and mild (20.6%) disability.

Table 5. Activities undertaken in difficult situations by people with disabilities

Type of activity undertaken in a difficult situation		Legal confirmation of disability			Total
		severe degree	moderate degree	mild degree	
I turn to others for help and advice	number	333	446	226	1005
	[%]	44.8	40.2	36.7	40.7
I mobilise myself and get on with it	number	263	489	258	1050
	[%]	35.4	44.1	48.4	42.6
I drink more alcohol	number	18	39	26	83
	[%]	2.5	3.6	4.3	3.4
I take comfort in the thought it could be a lot worse	number	206	357	244	807
	[%]	27.8	32.7	39.6	33.0
I give up and I do not know what to do	number	41	47	14	102
	[%]	5.6	4.3	2.3	4.2
I pray to God for help	number	259	315	195	769
	[%]	35.0	28.9	31.8	31.5
I take tranquilisers	number	39	69	29	137
	[%]	5.3	6.4	4.7	5.6
I distract myself with other things	number	121	247	126	494
	[%]	16.5	22.6	20.6	20.3

Source: own study based on data from: Social Diagnosis: Integrated Database. www.diagnoza.com [04.07.2017]

According to the results of the research presented in Table 5, only 4.2% of the respondents do not cope in difficult situations and give up. It can be seen that the higher the degree of disability, the more often the disabled surrenders and does not know what to do in difficult situations. Such a response was selected by more than twice the number of people with a severe disability (5.6%) as compared to people with mild disabilities (2.3%). 5.6% of the respondents declared that in order to cope with difficult situations they resort to sedatives, and 3.4% to alcohol (see Table 5). Such activities are also a type of surrender; the respondents who use alcohol and drugs in difficult situations push aside problems they cannot cope with.

The impact of an individual's social networks on a request for help in difficult situations is also noticeable. Only 25.6% of the respondents who do not have any contact with the family would seek help from others when in a difficult situation. Having even a small number of relations with the family, ranging from 1 to 5, results in an increase in asking others for help when facing a difficult situation, by 16.8 percentage points. Neither was a lack of friendly relations conducive to asking for help in difficult situations. Only 30.4% of the respondents declaring no interactions with friends undertake such activities, and those who have contact with 1 to 5 friends were by 13.6 percentage points more likely to ask for help in difficult situations. Lack of interactions with a broader circle of friends has the least impact on whether the respondents are willing to seek help from others. 33.5% of the respondents who have no acquaintances will not ask anyone for help. With an increase in the number of friends, the respondents are more willing to ask help of others in difficult situations (see Table 6). This shows that the mere fact of having social relationships with family, friends and acquaintances has an impact on whether the surveyed disabled people turn to others for help others in difficult situations. The lack of embedding in social networks is not conducive to respondents' asking others for help. People with disabilities who interact with their friends are also more likely to pull themselves together to overcome the difficulties they face. Only 37.3% of the respondents declaring no such relationships would undertake activities while in a crisis situation. Such activity was declared by 54.3% of persons with interactions within the range of 1 to 5 acquaintances, and with an increase of the network of friends, more than 60% of the respondents declared active overcoming of difficulties (see Table 6). 43.2% of the respondents who declared no contact with the family are able to mobilise and take action to resolve the difficult situation on their own. People with family relationships, even with a small number of relatives, undertake such activities more frequently. A similar relationship can be seen in the case of interactions with acquaintances; a lack of them makes the respondents more likely to remain passive in difficult situations, and they do not take independent actions aimed at solving problems. 44.7% of the respondents with no acquaintances are ready to mobilise in the face of difficulties. On the other hand, 52.9% of those who have between 1 and 5 acquaintances in their social networks declared such activities; they are also undertaken more often with an increase in the number of acquaintances. Most often, such activities in the face of difficult situations are undertaken by people with a network of contacts ranging from 11 to 15 acquaintances.

Table 6. Size and density of social networks and coping in difficult situations

Active coping with a difficult situation						
I turn to others for help and advice	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	25.6%	42.4%	44.8%	42.5%	41.6%	44.6%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	33.5%	43.4%	44.6%	46.7%	46.9%	49.2%
	interactions with friends					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	30.4%	44.0%	44.4%	41.2%	49.4%	45.1%
I mobilise myself and get on with it	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	43.2%	50.9%	58.8%	60.4%	57.6%	66.9%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	44.7%	52.9%	60.5%	67.2%	64.3%	67.1%
	interactions with friends					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	37.3%	54.3%	62.0%	66.7%	65.3%	64.4%
Accepting the difficult situation						
I take comfort in the thought it could be a lot worse	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	25.8%	29.9%	32.1%	31.9%	35.6%	30.8
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	32.1%	31.6%	31.1%	27.4%	32.5%	27.5%
	interactions with friends					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	34.5%	31.5%	30.2%	28.7%	28.1%	33.6%
I pray to God for help	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	18.7%	22.6%	26.4%	30.6%	37.7%	36.2%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	27.6%	27.0%	25.1%	22.7%	22.1%	23.8%
	interactions with friends					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	32.4%	25.3%	25.3%	25.6%	25.5%	26.7%

Table 6. cont.

I distract myself with other things	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	26.1%	21.8%	21.2%	22.9%	22.6%	18.2%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	19.8%	21.7%	21.5%	21.3%	21.8%	27.9%
	interactions with friends					
none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21	
22.1%	21.7%	21.4%	20.3%	24.4%	22.4%	
Giving up, inability to cope with a difficult situation						
I give up and I do not know what to do	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	5.3%	3.4%	2.2%	2.0%	1.7%	1.2%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	3.6%	2.7%	2.5%	1.7%	2.5%	2.1%
	interactions with friends					
none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21	
5.0%	2.8%	1.8%	1.6%	0.9%	2.7%	
I take tranquilizers	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	3.9%	3.6%	3.2%	2.8%	3.0%	2.4%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	4.8%	3.5%	2.6%	2.6%	3.0%	2.1%
	interactions with friends					
none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21	
4.6%	3.6%	2.5%	2.5%	2.2%	2.7%	
I drink more alcohol	interactions with family					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	7.4%	4.0%	2.5%	2.1%	2.4%	1.9%
	interactions with acquaintances					
	none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21
	3.9%	3.0%	3.3%	3.1%	2.4%	2.9%
	interactions with friends					
none	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	above 21	
3.9%	3.2%	2.9%	2.8%	2.2%	4.0%	

Source: own study based on data from: Social Diagnosis: Integrated Database. www.diagnoza.com [04.07.2017]

Embedding an individual in social networks also has an impact on reconciling with difficult situations by concentrating on other activities that divert attention from them. Such an attitude toward the emerging difficulties was most often presented by persons without any interactions with the family (26.1%). Having a family relationship makes it less common to take action to keep oneself from facing a difficult situation. Persons who have been in contact with a large number of relatives (over 21 people) reported such activity only at 18.2%. Lack of relationships with friends makes the respondents focus their attention on other activities to distract them from the problem. This answer was chosen by 22.1% of the respondents declaring lack of contact with friends. However, respondents with a wide circle of friends from 16 to 20 people (24.4%) and over 21 people (22.4%) behave similarly in the face of difficult situations. On the other hand, a lack of relations with friends results in less frequent adoption of such attitudes toward difficulties. Only 19.8% of the respondents who do not interact with their acquaintances escape from difficult situations, turning to other issues. Those who have a large circle of acquaintances (over 21 people) most often, at 27.9%, cope with difficult situations by devoting their attention to other issues. Therefore, it can be noticed that a wide circle of acquaintances and friends, unlike multiple relatives, makes the respondents turn their attention away from difficult situations, concentrating on other activities. Respondents who do not have family interactions would rarely accept a difficult situation, convincing themselves that they could have always been worse or that others had it worse (25.8%); those who have such relationships more often adopt such an attitude in difficult situations. The opposite relationship can be observed with respect to networks of friends. 34.5% of the people declaring a lack of such relationships adopt the attitude of acceptance of a difficult situation, justifying it with the fact that others are worse-off, or it could have been worse. Respondents who have relationships with friends less often choose this behaviour in difficult situations. Any influence of a network of friends on such a way of action in the face of difficulties is not noticeable. 32.1% of the respondents who do not interact with their acquaintances adopt such an attitude; among people having interactions with a small circle of 1 to 5 acquaintances it decreases by just 0.7 percentage point, and among those having interactions with a group of 6 to 10 acquaintances it decreases further by 0.5 percentage point; among people having 11–25 acquaintances it is the lowest, amounting to 27.4%, but later it increases to 32.5% among those who have had interactions with 16–20 acquaintances, and for people whose network of acquaintances included more than 21 people it again drops to 27.5%. A similar trend can be observed with regard to resorting to prayer and asking God for help in difficult situations. Such activities are most often chosen by those with a high number of family relationships (37.7% of those with 16 to 20 relatives and 36.2% with more than 21 relatives), while these were the least often chosen by those who have had no interactions with their families (18.7%). Having a network of friends makes respondents less likely to resort to requesting help from God. 32.4% of the respondents who do not make contact with friends chose this answer. On the other hand, among respondents with friendly relations with up to 20 people, such actions are undertaken by slightly over 25%; 26.7% of those who declared having interactions with a group of 21 or more friends resort to prayer in difficult situations. Networks of acquaintances have less impact on such behaviours in difficult situations among people with disabilities, although

it may be noted that with the size of the network of acquaintances, the tendency to choose prayer and asking God for help in difficult situations decreases (see Tab. 6). This shows that family networks influence how people with disabilities adopt attitudes toward accepting difficult situations. Networks of friends and acquaintances have a weaker impact, but those with friends and acquaintances are less likely to undertake actions that are equal to accepting the difficult situation. At the same time, however, having acquaintances and a large number of friends makes the respondents more likely to avoid confrontation with the difficult situation, devoting their attention to other activities, as opposed to people with family relations and small circles of friends of up to 15 people (see Tab. 6).

The results presented in Table 6 show that social networks of an individual are the backbone that provides the necessary social support to deal with difficulties more easily. People with disabilities who declared no contact with their immediate family, friends and acquaintances are less likely to declare active attitudes in difficult situations, and they are more likely to give up and resort to pharmacological drugs and alcohol to cope with them. Thus, the very presence of a social network involving relationships with family and friends and interactions with acquaintances influences the activities these people undertake in difficult situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The collected data show that social networks of people with disabilities are smaller than those of able-bodied people. In addition, regardless of their degree of disability, they are largely based on relationships with their closest relatives. This points to the importance of family for this category, which, given that it is a network with the greatest number of social interactions of people with disabilities, can also play an important supporting role in difficult situations. This is confirmed by the results of the studies, which indicate that the family is a basic support network for disabled people, both financially and in terms of the form of care services or psychological and emotional support (Gąciarz and Bartkowski 2014: 25; Ostrowska and Sikorska 2001: 104). The importance of family relationships for the functioning of people with disabilities is evidenced by the fact that the lack of interactions with the family significantly reduces rating of will to live of people with disabilities, and it makes them more likely to give up when facing difficulties and declare that they cannot cope in difficult situations. Networks of friends play a smaller role, but they are relatively smaller than family networks. They have a significant impact on the average rating of will to live. Friends play an important role in mobilising people with disabilities to actively take part in tackling difficult situations. More than half of the respondents declaring that they have contact with 1 to 5 friends declared that they mobilise and take action in difficult situations. Being embedded in social networks is also conducive to the use of their resources; disabled people who have family relationships and contact with friends and acquaintances are more likely to be ready to seek help from others in difficult situations. This shows that the mere presence of a network and the embedding of people with disabilities in it strongly contributes to the improvement of their quality of life, which is reflected in higher average ratings of desire to live in this category and which affects coping in difficult situations.

In this context, the fact that people with disabilities have smaller and less diverse social networks is of particular importance. The weakness of social networks based on relationships with family and friends and interactions with acquaintances translates into low levels of support. There is no foundation in the form of relationships and bonds with others that can provide adequate help to those in need. Institutional support networks are unable to compensate for deficits resulting from the weakness of formal and informal support networks realised in social networks. This is due to the fact that the state and its institutions are less and less capable of providing support because of the large increase in people entitled to benefits. As a result, today the sources of resources to meet needs are more and more often identified in the social networks of individuals. The weak embedding of people with disabilities in them may result in an increased sense of marginalisation and exclusion in this category of people, who, as a result of the lack of structural facilities provided by social networks, are unable to benefit from support in difficult situations.

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SPOŁECZNE SIECI WSPARCIA OSÓB Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIAMI

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie wsparcia społecznego osób niepełnosprawnych w perspektywie strukturalnej, pozwalającej pokazać relacje pomiędzy strukturą sieci społecznych osób niepełnosprawnych a podejmowanymi przez nich działaniami w sytuacjach trudnych. Sam poziom osadzenia jednostek w sieciach społecznych stanowi bowiem istotny czynnik umożliwiający im korzystanie ze wsparcia społecznego oraz zasobów, które są dostępne w sieciach społecznych. Bez relacji społecznych z osobami tworzącymi otoczenie społeczne jednostki nie może ona liczyć na pomoc w pokonywaniu trudności. Wsparcie nie jest bowiem możliwe bez obecności innych, którzy są gotowi go udzielić.

Analiza zostanie oparta na danych zgromadzonych w ramach „Diagnozy społecznej” w 2015 roku, które pozwolą na odtworzenie wielkości sieci społecznych osób niepełnosprawnych pod kątem liczby kontaktów z rodziną, przyjaciółmi i znajomymi.

Słowa kluczowe: wsparcie społeczne, sieci społeczne, niepełnosprawność, relacje, wymiana społeczna